



To Find Qualified Applicants, Think Regionally and Create a Pipeline

By Bob Canova, VWEA/VA AWWA Work for Water Committee

For more than two decades, we've been anticipating a major exodus of baby boomers from the US workforce... The 2007 recession appeared to postpone the silver tsunami. But now the long-tenured, highly skilled personnel from our industry are retiring at an unprecedented rate.'

Those are the opening sentences of a May 2019 *Opflow* article, *Attract Tomorrow's Water/Wastewater Workforce Today*. The *Opflow* article

reported that nearly one-third of the water/wastewater workforce in the San Diego area will reach retirement-eligible age in the next three years. A January 2019 *WE&T* article, *State of the Industry*, advises that in the Atlanta area, nearly half of the 1,415 current water/wastewater employees will be eligible for retirement in the next five years. But is it just the water/wastewater utilities in large metropolitan areas that are threatened with under-staffing? What about rural utilities? What about in Virginia?

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In 2018, the VAAWWA/VWEA Work for Water Committee conducted a survey of Virginia utilities to answer that question. The committee surveyed utilities throughout Virginia and received 38 responses. The responses came from a good mix of urban and rural utilities across the state. Seven responses were from large utilities with greater than 100,000 customers. Below is a tabulation of 495 anticipated positions to be filled in the next five years by the 38 Virginia utilities responding to the Work for Water survey.

The tabulation is topped by wastewater and water treatment operators and specialty trades (I&C, mechanical, and electrical positions). Not unexpectedly, Virginia utilities expect to have the greatest difficulty filling these three positions.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

The survey revealed that workforce recruitment and training challenges in Virginia vary. But a quarter of all responses indicated challenges with inexperienced and uncredentialed employment applicants. And 20 percent of the respondents indicated problems with uncompetitive salaries and a poor perception of the utility industry and its career opportunities. One utility reported that they 'have a career ladder for many positions and typically hire at the lower levels of the ladder and advance people as their skills improve. Salary increases do not keep pace with the improvement in skills and people leave for higher pay.' Another utility reported that 'We lose a lot of good talent, especially in wastewater treatment, because we simply don't pay enough. We have a career development plan which allows employees to get 10 percent salary increase for each licensure received (Class I, II and III) but as soon as they have their Class 1 Operators License, they go to a different county that pays 15 to 20 percent higher than we do. Therefore, we are just a stepping stone in their career.'

A third utility wrote: 'Having to work nights and holidays is a real impediment to hiring when it is for a relatively low salary.' And another: 'This is an industry that no new-generation folks want to enter due to pay and nature of work.'

It appears that inadequate salaries and poor image are already making it difficult for the Virginia water/wastewater industry to maintain full staffing during this economic period of low unemployment and rising minimum wages. The survey did not address water/wastewater maintenance staff, but filling these positions also appears to be a challenge.

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INADEQUATE RECRUITMENT METHODS?

In general, the utilities that responded to the survey seem to be recruiting in traditional manners, advertising on their website, in local newspapers, on association websites, and with the Virginia Employment Commission. A few also advertise with Neogov, Monster, or Indeed. Unfortunately, these recruitment methods may not be adequate in the future.

The previously referenced January 2019 *WE&T* article proposed a new approach to water/wastewater staff recruitment, focusing on career interests of new millennial employees. The millennials want work that is exciting and fresh, not a 30-year career with a single utility. They want to be environmental stewards. They want opportunities to gain related experience and skills before entering their new positions.

The water/wastewater industry needs to approach recruitment regionally by partnering with neighboring utilities, recruiting for water/wastewater positions simultaneously with other municipal staff positions, participating with other municipalities in an annual job fair, and making entry-level positions more attractive by updating or creating new job categories to provide greater flexibility for potential applicants.

For more recommendations, refer to the Brookings Institute online Metropolitan Infrastructure Initiative Series at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/water-workforce>.

Position	No. of Hires in Next Five Years	Typical Entry Level Salary Range	Expected Difficulty Filling Positions
Wastewater Treatment Operator	68	\$31,000-\$50,000	Great
Utility Trades (I&C, mech. and elect)	50	\$41,000-\$50,000	Great
Water Treatment Operator	40	\$20,000-\$40,000	Great
Customer Service	39	\$20,000-\$40,000	Average to Little
Heavy Equipment Operator	38	\$20,000-\$40,000	Great to Average
Administration	34	\$31,000-\$50,000	Average to Little
Engineer	32	\$51,000 - \$60,000	Great to Average
Meter Reading	31	\$20,000-\$30,000	Average to Little
Water Distribution Operator	28	\$20,000-\$50,000	Great to Average
Wastewater Collections Operator	27	\$20,000-\$50,000	Great to Average
Inspector	27	\$31,000-\$50,000	Average to Little
Leadership (Directors, Assistant Directors)	25	\$61,000-\$110,000+	Great to Average
Chemist	23	\$41,000 - \$50,000	Great to Average
Information Technology	16	\$31,000-\$110,000	Great to Average
Utility Locator	17	\$31,000-\$50,000	Average

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INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT APPROACHES

We have two great examples of new recruitment approaches right here in Virginia. The Hampton Roads Public Works Academy (www.hrpwa.org), which began in 2003, now has 15 regional utility members and offers a two-year, hands-on program for 20 high school students annually from each of three regional career and technical education centers. Classes are offered in 32 major areas of work within the Public Works and Utilities fields and provide the cadets an opportunity to receive a paid summer internship with a Public Works Academy member organization. The Public Works Academy has proven to be a successful feeder program for member organizations and hired cadets usually perform extremely well.

In 2017, the Western Virginia Water Authority (www.westernvawater.org) implemented an apprenticeship program for high school juniors and seniors from the Roanoke County career and technical education center to help fill future vacancies in their Water and Wastewater Treatment Operator and Water Distribution Operator positions. Students have a flexible working schedule during their junior and senior years and a 40-hour-per-week schedule for one year after graduation, allowing them to gain required training to sit for their Class 4 Wastewater Treatment and/or Water Treatment license. Western Virginia Water Authority also

established an Adult Apprenticeship program for electricians and implemented a \$2,000 Retention Bonus that employees receive after three years of continuous employment (other criteria must also be met).

One of the Work for Water survey recipients recommended that the Virginia water and wastewater industry look hard at attracting transitioning military by tapping into the Transition Assistance Program at Fort Lee and other military installations within the state. That recommendation fits well with the AWWA *Opflow* recommended recruitment approach – provide on-the-job training and licensing opportunities from the underrepresented population including women, veterans, and candidates in the criminal justice system.

The VA AWWA/WWEA Work for Water Committee is already working on your behalf, participating in over a dozen elementary, middle and high school gatherings and career fairs each year. The committee has exhibits, handouts and volunteers to assist your local and regional recruitment efforts.

For assistance with school career fair participation, or to join the committee, contact Work for Water Committee Chair Stephen Turner (sturner@gfnet.com). ☺



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